

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: December 7, 2017

Agenda Item: West Kootenai Wildlife Management Area Fire Salvage Project

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Background

Approximately 745 acres of the 917-acre West Kootenai Wildlife Management Area (WKWMA) burned in the Caribou fire under red flag weather conditions on the afternoon/evening of September 2, 2017. About 600 forested acres of the WKWMA burned under high-intensity crown fire resulting in near 100% mortality. FWP hosted a field tour on September 29, 2017 which included FWP staff, a neighboring landowner, the logger and forester who implemented the thinning project in 2014-15, and U.S. Forest Service firefighters to survey the effects of the fire on the WKWMA. FWP is proposing to conduct timber salvage on approximately 506 acres, to achieve habitat and forest regeneration benefits, further described below.

Public Involvement Process & Results

FWP released the draft environmental assessment for public review on October 24, 2017 and accepted public comment through November 8, 2017. A public notice was posted on FWP's webpage: <http://fwp.mt.gov>, and notices were sent to numerous newspapers that included: *The Tobacco Valley News*, *Flathead Beacon*, *Western News*, *Daily Inter Lake*, *Whitefish Pilot*, *Hungry Horse News*, *Lake County Leader*, *Sanders County Ledger*, and other newspapers in western Montana as well as several radio stations. FWP received 34 comments, all in support of the proposed project.

Alternatives and Analysis

No action would result in no salvage timber harvesting taking place on the WKWMA at this time. The proposed action would salvage harvest approximately 1.62 million board feet of merchantable timber on approximately 506 acres of conifer forest. The purposes of the proposed action include: 1) avoid an accumulation of downed timber that could preclude ungulate movements, 2) promote natural regeneration of the forest where possible, and 3) conduct the work while the value of timber can cover the cost of the treatment. Existing roads would be utilized, no new roads would need to be constructed. A portion of the burned area would be retained to reduce sight distances and provide habitat diversity including: 56 acres of snag patches that burned under high-intensity fire; 37 acres with excessive slopes (> 35%); and other areas that burned under low intensity fire. Any surplus revenue generated from this project would be used to fund future rehabilitation and forest management on the WKWMA as well as forest management work on other WMAs across the state. Regardless of the alternative chosen, FWP would continue to manage the WKWMA for wildlife and compatible recreation activities, including evaluating the need to replant trees within 3 years, re-vegetating severely burned and disturbed areas, and/or conducting noxious weed management treatments.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends implementing the proposed WKWMA fire salvage project because of the aforementioned habitat and restoration benefits. The cost of the project would be covered by the value of timber, which starts diminish within 1 to 2 years of burning.

Proposed Motion

I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the proposed timber salvage project on West Kootenai Wildlife Management Area as presented by FWP.